

CONTRA SIMONE WEIL

"The Voices of Demons for the Silence of God"

HANS MEYERHOFF

THE significant facts of Simone Weil's life have grown into something like a legend. Born in 1909, she was the child of well-off, assimilated French Jews. The biographical sources—found chiefly in the reminiscences of Gustave Thibon, an intimate friend and Simone Weil's literary executor*—do not say much about her parents, but a brother who became a brilliant mathematician seems to have played a crucial role in her life. She believed that she would never be able to equal his intellectual genius, and this feeling seems to have produced two severe emotional crises in her adolescence and to have deepened the sense of inferiority and personal worthlessness from which she suffered all her life.

Yet her own intellectual powers were remarkable. She showed extraordinary gifts at school and won the respect of such teachers as the philosophers Le Senne and Alain. Combining exceptional learning with passionate religious temperament, she was capable of startling intellectual insights. She became a scholar and teacher of philosophy, mathematics, and Greek, and by the age of

twenty she began publishing articles. But she frequently interrupted teaching and research for action. She threw herself into politics—Communist, Syndicalist, and Anarchist; and for a year she worked in a factory. When the Nazis occupied France she sought refuge at M. Thibon's farm and worked in the fields.

Her death was the climax of an extremely ascetic, self-denying life. It was almost a suicide. Although she had contracted tuberculosis, she refused, while in England—to which she returned after a short stay in the United States—to eat more than the hunger rations of the people in occupied France. Throughout her life she showed a complete disregard—even contempt—for physical needs and comforts, and suffered constantly from pains and ailments, particularly from violent chronic headaches. These physical sufferings coincided with intense spiritual torments. Drawn ever closer to Catholicism, she occupied herself increasingly with theology, and came to feel herself completely a Christian; yet she refused baptism. The writings for which she is best known were all published posthumously. *Gravity and Grace*, with an introduction by M. Thibon, and *Waiting for God* are records of her religious quest and spiritual struggle. *The Need for Roots*, with an introduction by T. S. Eliot, is a religio-political tract written for the Gaullist movement and intended as a contribution to postwar planning.

Her brief life, the Stoic endurance of her sufferings, the long dark night of her soul, her asceticism, her mysticism and radicalism, her passionate, uncompromising pursuit

DRAWING on the full text of Simone Weil's private notebooks (which were published in their entirety for the first time earlier this year), HANS MEYERHOFF attempts to account for the strong religious anti-Semitism of this Franco-Jewish writer, who has come to be regarded in some intellectual quarters as a kind of saint. Mr. Meyerhoff is associate professor of philosophy at the University of California in Los Angeles and the author of *Time in Literature* (1955) as well as a regular contributor to the literary magazines. His most recent previous appearance in our pages was with a review of Arthur Koestler's *The Trail of the Dinosaur* (June 1956). At the present, Mr. Meyerhoff is visiting professor at M.I.T.

*M. Thibon and Father Perrin, another friend, have published a book about her life and thought: *Simone Weil telle que nous l'avons connue*.

of spiritual illumination, and the dramatic circumstances of her death—these aspects of Simone Weil's life and personality have helped shape the image of a religious hero—almost a saint. In the words of a recent English critic (E. W. F. Tomlin), she was "one more and perhaps the greatest 'pilgrim of the absolute' in our time." And her friend Thibon, while acknowledging that she was a difficult, perplexing, and often exasperating person, testifies that "in no human being have I come across such familiarity with religious mysteries; never have I felt the word *supernatural* more charged with reality than when in contact with her."

Now the private *Notebooks of Simone Weil** (from which her earlier publications were excerpted) have been published in their entirety. They throw a new and sharper light upon an aspect of her thought and personality that has been rather neglected so far, and which has a special significance for the Jewish reader. I mean her extreme religious anti-Semitism. "Her anti-Semitism," M. Thibon writes, "was so violent that the continuity established by the Church between the Old and New Testament was one of the chief obstacles to her becoming a Catholic. She was fond," he continues, "of saying that Hitler hunted on the same ground as the Jews and only persecuted them in order to resuscitate under another name and to his own advantage their tribal god, terrestrial, cruel, and exclusive." T. S. Eliot observed that it was Simone Weil's "rejection of Israel that made her a very heterodox Christian," and that, in this respect, she fell "into something very like the Marcionite heresy."

Marcion was a Christian theologian of the first half of the 2nd century whose thought belongs to the religious phenomenon known as Gnosticism. When he failed to gain acceptance for his ideas among the Christians of Rome, Marcion founded his own church, for which he supplied a radical theology in a work called *Antitheses*. Gnosticism and Marcion celebrate a bizarre revival

in the writings of Simone Weil; and it is this aspect of her work to which I wish to address myself particularly.

GNOSTICISM takes its name from the Greek word for knowledge. But *gnosis* meant knowledge in a special sense—a higher, mysterious, esoteric kind of knowledge primarily designed to obtain personal salvation. In Gnosticism, speculative philosophy was fused with religious revelation; or incarnations and mystic rites, allegories and numerologies, dogmas of faith and superstitions were integrated into a systematic body of ideas purporting to represent knowledge about man and the universe. The final product was usually an eclectic, syncretistic mixture drawing upon a great variety of intellectual and religious sources.

Gnosticism was a typical product of Hellenism. Gnostic movements and sects arising in Persia, Greece, Rome, Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere mingled with each other in the great cultural and ideological melting pot of Hellenism. Gnostic influences may also be found in Jewish history: for example, in the revolt of the Maccabees against Hellenistic culture, and in the impressive eclectic philosophical synthesis concocted by Philo of Alexandria. Cabbalistic thought and literature represent a late flowering of Gnostic mysticism in Jewish life.

Gnosticism derives its chief historical significance, however, from its impact upon Christianity. Seeing it as a threat to the entire creed, the early Fathers of the Church carried on an unremitting theological struggle against Gnosticism. The Gnostics, too, were theologians, but their theology differed from that of the Church Fathers in that they were much more radical and indiscriminate in bringing Gnostic ideas, Oriental mystery religions, and allegorical fantasies into the body of Christian dogma. This far-reaching fusion of Christianity with pagan religious symbolism was opposed by the bishops and Fathers of the early Church. Gnosticism was declared a heresy and, after long and bitter controversies, was finally overcome by Augustine, who put down

*Putnam, 2 vols., 648 pp., \$10.00.

Manicheanism, the last potent Gnostic uprising against the Church.

Most Gnostic thinkers, including Marcion, combined their synthesis of Christianity and Hellenism with a radical attack upon the religious tradition of Judaism. It is this aspect of Gnosticism which comes to life again in the writings of Simone Weil.

THE EARLY history of the Church is haunted by a dilemma which must have had a special poignancy for Jewish converts. How should they reconcile the old faith of their fathers with the new gospel of the Son of God? Beginning with Paul, the foremost Jewish convert to Christianity, two attitudes may be distinguished in this matter. The attitude which won out in the doctrinal struggle is embodied in the official Catholic dogma that the teachings of the Old Testament are restored and preserved in the new faith. The God of Genesis, i.e., the God of Israel, is the Creator of the world; he is the Father of mankind, and Jesus is his only begotten son. Moreover, Jesus came to fulfill, not to abolish, the old law of Moses; the Messianic voices of the Hebrew prophets proclaimed, and thus vindicated, him as savior. This position was reaffirmed in 1933, when Pope Pius XI, in answer to the new Christian paganism and the persecution of the Jews in Germany, proclaimed that "spiritually we are all Semites."

The other attitude was to reject and repudiate the authority of the Old Testament, which is what the Gnostics did. Paul himself had resolved the personal and religious dilemma posed by his conversion by hammering out a set of doctrinal antitheses—between the flesh and the spirit, between the old Law and the new Gospel, between the old God of anger and the new God of love, between salvation by works and salvation by faith, between the despair over the sickness unto death and the hope of life everlasting in Jesus.

Pauline theology did not lead to an outright repudiation of the Old Testament, but it did constitute a severe attack upon it; and it was chiefly under the influence of Paul's

teachings that Gnostic thinkers moved toward a radical break with the Jewish origins of Christianity—partly in order to accommodate Christianity more easily to non-Jewish religious cults and ideas, partly in order to establish the uniqueness of the new soteriological faith in Jesus. The common element in the Gnostic trend was the belief that the essence of the new faith lay in its break with the world of man's fall depicted in the Old Testament, and by its triumph over the God of Israel who had created this world of sin, suffering, and death. Thus the view developed, as Adolf Harnack wrote, that "the believers in Christ were the only true community of God . . . and that the Jewish Church, persevering in its stubborn unbelief, was the synagogue of Satan."

Marcion—who, unlike St. Paul, was a Gentile—developed these views to an extreme. The ideas contained in his *Antitheses* throw into sharp relief the significant features of the Gnostic revolt ("antithesis") against the Old Testament.

The Christian gospels reveal a God of love, mercy, and compassion; the God of the Old Testament is jealous, cruel, and revengeful; hence they cannot be the same. Since Jesus proclaimed redemption through faith and love, he cannot be the son of the malign, cruel God of the Old Testament; hence he is the son of the new "unknown" God whom Paul hailed in the market place of Athens. This is confirmed by Jesus himself, who declared war on the Pharisees and constantly broke the old Law in words and deeds; hence he repudiated the old God behind this Law and asserted that new wine should not be poured into old vessels. The Old Testament is the record of man's history in the state of fall, sin, despair, and death; it is, in fact, the reign of Satan on earth. This history has come to an end with Jesus who redeemed mankind and destroyed the power of the old evil God. Hence the new faith and its sacred scriptures must be purged of all Jewish influences (which Marcion set out to do) lest it be distorted and contaminated by them. Textual revisions, finally, were used to defend doctrinal differences.

Thus Marcion distinguished between the spirit of Christ that dwelled everlastingly with God, and the man Jesus who was born and died on this earth; he also repudiated, as did other Gnostics, the dogma of the resurrection in the flesh, and the early Christian faith in the return of Jesus and the establishment of his kingdom on earth.

THESE Gnostic ideas, as we have said, were defeated in the struggle for official supremacy within the Church, but they have lived on as undercurrents in the history of Christian theology and heresy. Simone Weil's religious struggle represents, as it were, a violent "return of the repressed." It seems almost as if the Jew faced with the crisis of conversion to Christianity relives a historical drama. He must come to terms with his religious heritage, and perhaps can do so in only one of two ways: either he must feel that the Apostolic Church represents the natural fulfillment and fruition of the religious seeds contained in the Jewish faith (this seems to have been the solution adopted by contemporary converts like Alfred Stern and Edith Stein) or he must radically and violently repudiate that faith. This was what Simone Weil did.*

What makes her case so dramatic is that she launched her Gnostic revolt against the Jewish religion at a time when the Jewish people were suffering the worst agonies and tortures they have ever undergone within the Christian world. Staking her whole life on the hope and faith of salvation in Jesus, she was driven to indict the religion of her own people in the language of their worst enemies and persecutors.

Reading this indictment one sympathizes with the writer who protested against the

*The case of actual or potential converts must be distinguished from individuals who leave the Jewish faith, or are excluded from it, without joining another "faith." Thus Spinoza does not belong in this group. His rational or mystical pantheism was as anti-Christian as it was anti-Jewish, and he was just as bitterly attacked, after the publication of his *Politico-Theological Tractatus*, by Christian theologians as by rabbis before his excommunication.

review of *The Notebooks* which appeared in the *New York Times* on December 16, 1956. The reviewer called Simone Weil "Jewish, supremely and proudly so," praised "everything" she wrote as "new-minted, pure gold," and hailed her as "one of the greatest minds of our time." It is odd how such reviews make their appearance, but it is perhaps more disturbing to see how Simone Weil is presented to the public as *nothing but* a spiritual hero—a woman endowed with a restless, brilliant mind, who wrote about Homer, Plato, politics, mythology, and mathematics, a woman who explored the mysteries of divine love and transformed herself into a "pilgrim of the absolute." This transfiguration of Simone Weil has now become the conventional public portrait. Perhaps she was all these things, but she was more: she was also blind, cruel, and almost delusional, and she indulged in orgies of self-laceration. Did she draw up the terrible indictment of the religion of her people in order to inflict yet deeper wounds upon herself, and did she believe this new agony would make her more pleasing in the eyes of the new God?

In her discussion of the *Iliad*, Simone Weil perceived, and partly admired, a supernatural quality and magnificence behind the inhuman, wasteful violence which she assumed to be the main theme of Homer's epic. But the bloodshed, violence, and brutality she reads of in the Old Testament inspire in her only horror. "Moses—starts off with a murder—Joshua—then a host of 'Judges' (murders, betrayals)—Samuel—Saul—David—Solomon—Kings of Judah and Israel. . . ." For Simone Weil the history of the ancient Hebrews is a unique record of murders and massacres. "Practically the only thing the Hebrews did was to exterminate." She duly notes "Abraham's cruelty towards Hagar and Ishmael"; the "horrible crime" committed by Jacob's children against the Hivites; "Joseph's atrocious conduct towards the Egyptians"; she counts the number of deaths caused by battle, plague, and earthquakes; and she dwells with horror and disgust upon the "deceitful," "barbarous" ac-

tions enjoined in Deuteronomy 20:10-18: and "thou shalt utterly destroy them, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perrizites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites"—as if the Greeks she so admired had not sacked and ravaged Troy. Or, more importantly, as if these dark and stark injunctions of the Old Testament did not have a meaning in the natural evolution of the Jewish faith and people beyond their overt cruelty. For Simone Weil there was but one conclusion: Israel was an "artificial people, held together by a terrible violence." "What about the human sacrifices made to Baal?" Her answer: "The extermination of whole peoples is something far more appalling." Thus "everything [in the Old Testament] is of a polluted and atrocious character . . . beginning with Abraham, right down through all his descendants . . . as though to indicate perfectly clearly: Beware! That way lies evil."

Israel's "pollution" lies in its immorality and materialism. Here the record, according to Simone Weil, is, if anything, worse than that of the atrocities. The books of the Old Testament reek of carnal lust, incest, prostitution, defilement, drunkenness, deceit, theft, and fraud. There are but a few among the patriarchs who escape this charge. "Abraham defiles himself" and "hands his wife over to Pharaoh out of cowardice." Thus "the history of Israel begins with a prostitution. It is Israel's original impurity." And the original impurity was multiplied on a grand scale: Isaac "repeats Abraham's sin of cowardice. He allows himself to be deceived by Jacob, blinded by gluttony and foolishness. . . ." Jacob, in turn, "obtains the rights of the first-born by a cruel form of blackmail, and his father's blessings by lies and fraud. At Bethel he practices blackmail on God. He swindles Laban about the cattle. . . . Reuben (his eldest son) cohabits with his father's concubine. . . . Judah lies with his son's widow taking her to be a prostitute." There is nothing overlooked in Simone Weil's violent outbursts of moral indignation—not even the "excessive prosperity of the children of Israel in Egypt."

THIS is not the first time (nor will it be the last) that such accusations have been made against Israel, and against Israel alone—as if the civilizations of Greece, India, Egypt, and other peoples, among all those in whom Simone Weil discovers sparks of divine incarnation, did not reveal the same primitive morality of nature. Or, more importantly, as if we were not here (as elsewhere) dealing with stories, myths, and memories which recapture the dramatic origins of and transitions toward the so-called civilized morality which she applies in judging them. For Simone Weil there is but one conclusion: "The Hebrews, having rejected the Egyptian revelation, got the God they deserved—a carnal and collective God, who never spoke to anyone's soul, up to the time of exile." They were "too carnal-minded for any other God but Jehovah."

Hence Jehovah is Satan in disguise; and the religious mission of Israel is, at best, a warning that "this way lies evil," at worst, a terrible fraud and deceit. The only good thing that can be said for Israel is that it "represents an attempt at a supernatural form of social life," that "it succeeded in producing the best example of its kind"; but that "the result shows the sort of divine revelation of which the Great Beast [this is Simone Weil's way of designating the world of nature and man] is capable." Both Israel and ancient Rome are incarnations of the Great Beast. And the famous Law of the Old Testament "was a sort of curse, as St. Paul says."

Thus, in the Pauline-Gnostic tradition, no good, let alone salvation, can come from the Law, or from this attempt to infuse social life with a supernatural or divine spirit. "Israel's spirituality was exclusively collective," and to ascribe any divine mission to the Jewish people is a mockery in view of their carnal and cruel nature. They were "chosen in order to be rendered blind, to be the executioner of Christ." (Perhaps Simone Weil, too, remembered taunts heard in childhood that she belonged to the people of "Christ-killers.") Rome and Israel "are perhaps the only two people to be ignorant

of incarnation," and "it is for this reason that everything in Israel is contaminated with sin, because there is nothing pure without a participation in the incarnate divinity."

This passionate Gnostic denial of any trace of divinity or spirituality in the sacred Scriptures of Israel caused Simone Weil considerable trouble. After all, the Old Testament did preach an undeniably pure monotheism and did contain many specific injunctions against idolatry, and it was equally undeniable that the prophets, at least, displayed a "messianic mentality." But, alas, this mentality "blinded them to the truth of the Messiah." It is pathetic to see how Simone Weil twists and distorts the Old Testament to make it all appear as pure deficit on her balance sheet. "The belief in a one and only God," of course, is incompatible—at least, for non-Christians—with religious dogmas like the Trinity or with faith in a divine mediator. But for Simone Weil, this striving for a pure monotheism was precisely "the cause" of what she called the "moral blindness" or the "tribal collectivism" of Israel. "There cannot be any contact as from one person to another between man and God except through the person of the Mediator. Apart from him, the only way in which God can be present to man is in a collective, a national way." The divine spirit without mediation turns into the "demoniacal." Hence, paradoxical as it may sound, their opposition to idolatry was the greatest misfortune of the Jewish people. In the first place, this opposition made an *eidolon*—and not a holy people—out of Israel itself: "no statue used to be created for Jehovah; but Israel is the statue of Jehovah"; and, in the second place, it caused Israel's doom: "The Jews were not allowed to be 'idolaters,' because otherwise they would not have killed Christ. If some ancient Hebrews were to come amongst us, the images of Christ crucified, the worship of the Virgin, and above all the Eucharist, God's real presence in a piece of matter, would be regarded by them as being that very thing which they were accustomed to name idolatry." The refusal to submit to this idolatry, then,

constitutes Israel's religious failure; for the problem of "monotheism" can be "solved" only, as in Christianity, "through the Incarnation, and . . . the Virgin and Saints."

The specific accusations rise to a veritable paroxysm of religious anti-Semitism in the terrible summing up of the indictment: "It is not surprising that a people composed of fugitive slaves, or rather of the children of fugitive slaves, led forth to take possession by a series of massacres of a land whose soft climate and natural fertility gave it a paradise-like quality, and which had been organized on a flourishing basis by civilizations in whose labors they had taken no part, and which they proceeded to destroy—that such a people was unable to produce anything very good. . . . To speak of 'God as educator' in connection with this people is a heinous sort of joke. Is it surprising that there should be so much evil in a civilization—our own—which is corrupted at its roots, in its very inspiration, by this atrocious lie? The curse of Israel weighs upon Christendom. The atrocities, the extermination of heretics and of unbelievers—all this was Israel. Capitalism was Israel. . . . Totalitarianism is Israel (more particularly so among the latter's worst enemies.)" There is only one poison in the modern world—"the notion of progress"—which is "specifically Christian." "The other poisons mixed up with the truth of Christianity are of Jewish origin" and must be purged, as Marcion before her believed, from the body of Christian faith and dogma. "Jehovah, the Church of the Middle Ages, H[itle]r—all these are earthly Gods"—in short, incarnations of Satan.

READING this terrible outburst, one is moved to hope that Simone Weil attained in death what she did not attain in life: the peace that passeth understanding, and that she did not take the voices of demons for the silence of God. But these are matters on which we cannot cast any light. We can ask a more modest question and wonder, on a human plane, what sources may have contributed to this revival of Gnosticism, to this individual recapitulation

of a historical crisis.* Why could Simone Weil believe in a God of love and grace only through converting the God of the Jewish people into an incarnation of Satan? *The Notebooks* reveal that she inflicted this deep wound upon herself and committed this slander upon her own people as a last desperate measure of defense against total despair. The Christian faith (into which she was never baptized) was her last hope among the ruins of existence. For Simone Weil's "reading of reality"—as she called the struggle raging in her soul—yielded a pattern of total alienation from the world, man, and God.

"The world is uninhabitable"; and everything in it is evil. "That is why we have to flee to the next." The natural order of things, according to her, was subject to an inexorable, meaningless necessity—the force of "gravity," and gravity produced nothing but suffering and pain, disgust and despair. It is Kafka's world: "Our life is nothing but impossibility, absurdity. . . . Contradiction is our wretchedness; and the feeling of our wretchedness is the feeling of our reality. . . . That's why we must love it." It is the world of Ivan Karamazov: there is no reason, "absolutely none," by which the intellect can answer Ivan's doubt and despair at all the senseless and unjustifiable evil in this world—or, "one only": that it is an inscrutable, unintelligible manifestation of "supernatural love; that it is God's will. And for this last reason I would just as readily accept a world which was only evil and whose consequences could only be evil as a child's tear."

THE world as it is, then, is utter darkness, and to think that a God could illuminate or "sanctify" it, in the language of Jewish tradition, blasphemes the faith that Simone Weil sought to embrace. Such Gnosticism voices an anguished protest and revolt against

the sufferings of the human race throughout history, and against the hypocrisy by which it has often tried to cover over its misery. But when dark despair saps the marrow of the self, such a revolt is condemned to remain a pathetic, futile, impotent gesture that delivers human fate all the more completely into the hands of the mysterious, incomprehensible powers responsible for the suffering and the evil endured by mankind.

It is the estimate of man and of his powers vis-à-vis the world and God that decides the quality and direction of the Gnostic revolt. In Simone Weil, the curse of "gravity" or heaviness laid upon the world produced a painful excess of self-mortification. "Everything which is in me, without exception, is absolutely valueless. . . . Everything which I appropriate to myself becomes immediately valueless. *Ouden eimi*: I am nothing." *The Notebooks* develop ingenious variations on this theme: "I have to love to be nothing. How horrible it would be if I were something. I have to love my nothingness, love to be nothingness." Or, in the moments of greatest despair: "Leprosy—that is me. All that I am is leprosy. The 'I' as such is leprosy."

The Need for Roots—Simone Weil's political testament—to the contrary notwithstanding, these attitudes toward the world and the self do not create genuine possibilities in the sphere of social action. Simone Weil, as we have seen, participated in social movements and political affairs, but "what she cared about," as T. S. Eliot put it, "was human souls"—more specifically the salvation of human souls, not social blueprints or political manifestoes. For "the social is irremediably the domain of the devil." "Man is a social animal, and the social element represents evil. . . . It follows that life cannot be anything else but a spiritual laceration." Simone Weil's social ethics was as simple and severe as her personal ethics: unconditional surrender to the inscrutable will of God. "Even if one could be like unto God, it would be preferable to be a handful of mud that is obedient to God."

*The case of Simone Weil is not unique. Similar Gnostic revivals, with implications of a religious anti-Semitism, may be found in A. J. Toynbee's *Study of History*, and in other historical and psychological writings of our time.

THAT the spirit of God may prevail, the body must die. Simone Weil lived to die unto the body. Most of the Gnostic sects, too, subscribed to an extreme asceticism and other-worldliness. Spiritual existence, especially for the elect, was incompatible with the desires of the flesh. The Marcionites, it is said, required married people to submit to divorce in order to be eligible for baptism. Somewhat analogously, Simone Weil believed that the church was even too lax in its taboo against all sexual intercourse not serving the purpose of procreation. According to her, one should "utterly renounce" the sexual act as such, and then "resort to it on the few occasions in the course of a lifetime" that were unavoidable lest the race become extinct. "In this way there would scarcely be any difference between the father of a family and a monk, so far as chastity is concerned." A casual remark like this is worth pondering in order to appreciate the kind of revulsion Simone Weil must have felt when reading the early books of the Old Testament—or when contemplating her own sexuality.

A reading of reality like Simone Weil's is prelude to a religion of absurdity. Like Kierkegaard, the solitary Danish thinker of the 19th century who has come to mean so much to the distraught minds of our time, Simone Weil leaped into faith on the wings of the absurd. "Extreme justice combined with the appearance of extreme injustice . . ."; "God both One and three . . ."; "Christ both God and man . . ."; "The Host both earthly matter and body of God . . ."—these are some of the religious paradoxes over which Simone Weil brooded and suffered. But, as we have seen, human existence itself is absurd: "Contradiction is our wretchedness; and the feeling of our wretchedness is the feeling of our reality." Crushed by contradictions, she made "contradiction" the criterion of faith. "Contradiction is our path toward God because we are creatures, and because creation is itself a contradiction." Or: "Contradiction experienced right to the very depths of the being means spiritual laceration, it means the

Cross." The two realms of being, nature and the spirit, body and soul, the world and God, loomed in her mind as absolutely incommensurable and irreconcilable. True to the Gnostic tradition, Simone Weil tried to overcome the terrible strain between these two dimensions, which she could not reconcile by human powers, by an appeal to mysterious, supernatural powers of mediation. She searched frantically for signs of mediation, and discovered mediating incarnations everywhere: in the religion of the Chaldeans and of the Egyptians, in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, in Greek mythology, poetry, and drama, in Plato, Homer, and the Orphic mysteries, in Norse mythology, in Taoism and Zen Buddhism, in music and in mathematics—everywhere, she believed, there were signs and indications which anticipated man's final delivery from sin and death in the incarnation of Jesus as the Christ: everywhere—except in Israel and Rome.

PERHAPS it is not so difficult to see now why Israel remained the great offense and stumbling block in this desperate pursuit of personal salvation. And perhaps the terrible curse Simone Weil laid upon the religion of her own people is a blessing in disguise. For what makes her shrink back in horror from "the goodly tents of Jacob and the tabernacles of Israel" upon which Balaam bestowed a reluctant blessing? What else but the purity of its monotheism gradually cleansed of all traces of magic and idolatrous imagery; the simple faith that the ordinary life of man, the intractable Adam, the mighty Leviathan, the great Earth Mother, the flesh, society, and nature, might be infused with a spirit of civilized humanity, or, in religious language, might be hallowed and sanctified; the prophetic faith that peace, love, and justice might transform man into a being pleasing in the sight of God; the human faith that the divine word is a gift to man in this life, not a promise of blessedness beyond; that the *Shechinah* is imprisoned in this world, not enthroned in the next; hence, the stubborn faith that

this world is unredeemed; and perhaps the most creative of all ideas of religion, that which is born of the tension between the faith that the world is not redeemed and the resolve that it be redeemed by man's works and love. I don't know what the learned rabbis say, but speaking for myself, I find these "offenses" to be Israel's great and lasting contribution and the basis for my own private belief that it is worth being a Jew in a Christian world.

Simone Weil chose to condemn these "offenses" in the name of divine love and grace at a time when the prophetic faith of Israel was being gassed out of existence. She was not satisfied with such simple roots of faith as Israel's, but it is at least an open question whether she herself was not more uprooted—by *her* faith, which left her dangling in the No Man's Land of theological obscurantism—than the people to whom she offered *The Need for Roots*. Since she ultimately despaired of man, she could not believe that there might be a *human* life beyond despair. And thus her struggle for a new faith, powerful, passionate, and poignant as it is, is ultimately the expression of a desperate nihilism. The last message of hope is that of *The Grand Inquisitor*: magic, mystery, and authority. And perhaps this is the message that will prevail in our time.

WHY did the God of Israel become the incarnation of Satan? Why did Simone Weil choose to condemn only the Jewish people? As we have seen, she discovered divine incarnations among a great many peoples of the ancient world—even though their historical and religious records (not to speak of that of the Christian peoples) were likewise filled with lust, incest, rape, cruelty, violence, and murder. Why the exception in the case of Israel? Why the one terrible curse amid the many generous blessings? And why did she even misread the text of the Hebrew Bible in order to make the curse stick? Thus, Jacob's wrestling with the angel is seen as another instance of "Israel's original impurity." What offends

her so deeply in this story is the fact that Jacob is not destroyed by the angel, but seems to emerge victoriously from the struggle. Hence her accusing question: "Isn't it the greatest possible calamity, when you are wrestling with God, not to be beaten?" It is indeed—when the encounter between the human and the divine cannot be envisaged in any other terms but those of unconditional submission, obedience, and impotence on the part of man. The Biblical tale is much more subtle, however, than Simone Weil could perceive. Jacob does not emerge simply as the victor; or his alleged victory has quite a different meaning. The episode ends with these words: "And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me . . . thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there" (Genesis 32:29). In other words, Jacob receives a blessing from, but not the "name" of, the angel; or the power of the blessing does not derive from Jacob's gaining possession of the *magic* name of the God. The characteristic religious significance of this incident*—the conflict of magic and monotheism—escapes her altogether, just as she is completely blind to the Hebrew Scriptures' depiction of the slow, painful transformation of tribal hordes into a holy people making a covenant with God.

It is difficult to think, against the background of contemporary history, that such blind spots are due only to a Gnostic theology; or to avoid the suspicion that personal factors must have contributed to this revival of Gnosticism. *The Notebooks* reveal despair and self-hatred *in extremis*; they cry out in anguish over the absence of perfection and love in this world. Perhaps the faith of her fathers assumed such monstrous shape in the mind of Simone Weil because she demanded from them—her fathers and her people—a degree of perfection and a purity of love which are inhuman. Because they were not pure and perfect, her incapacity to love them as they were—or her incapacity

*A similar story is told when Rachel "steals" her father's "images"—for Simone Weil simply another clear case of thievery among the Jews.

to be loved as she was—turned into hatred and despair. Because her people were tainted with the flaws of our common mortality, she despaired at ever erasing these flaws in herself. And thus she came to curse those she may have loved most—and herself for the failure of perfection and love in their lives and hers. Perhaps this helps to explain the wild Gnostic “antitheses” that took shape in her mind: either absolute perfection and pure love or complete wretchedness and total despair—either all or nothing.

“What does it matter that there should never be joy in me, since there is perpetually perfect joy in God.” What does it matter, indeed, if the lovelessness of one’s own existence is ultimately the only condition for believing in the infinite love of God. “The attentive contemplation of misery, without compensation and consolation, drives us into the supernatural, and then we cannot do otherwise than love the source of it.” We cannot do otherwise, because the only proof of God’s perfection “is that we love him” precisely because of the misery he has inflicted upon us. The deepest roots of such a theology, all verbal protestations

and overt actions to the contrary notwithstanding, are nourished by contempt, hatred, and cruelty toward man. “Contempt of human misery is the only source of supernatural felicity.” Where did she find these bitter words in the sayings of Jesus? Perhaps she had to be so cruel and unforgiving to those she loved because she could not forgive herself for the contempt and cruelty in her own love. And thus she exalted to the level of supernatural grace what she could not resolve on the level of human gravity. Faith is the last refuge from despair at the failure of life: “Relentless necessity, misery, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of exhausting labour, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, terror, disease—all this is but the divine love. It is God who out of love withdraws from us so that we can love him.”

Thus God withdraws from a world that is doomed; he becomes the “absent God,” *Deus absconditus*—because of the total absence of love and hope on earth. “Life,” according to Simone Weil, was but “an ersatz form of salvation.” Perhaps the salvation she sought was but an ersatz form of life.